

Winter 12-15-1990

## Sauron Gets Drafted (and Other Thoughts on the Battle of Creativity): 21st Mythopoeic Conference Guest of Honor Address

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### Recommended Citation

Wynne, Patrick (1990) "Sauron Gets Drafted (and Other Thoughts on the Battle of Creativity): 21st Mythopoeic Conference Guest of Honor Address," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 17: No. 2, Article 1.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol17/iss2/1>

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### Sauron Gets Drafted (and Other Thoughts on the Battle of Creativity): 21st Mythopoeic Conference Guest of Honor Address

#### Abstract

Guest of Honor address, Mythcon 21. Gives insight into both the necessary research and creative process necessary to illustrate mythopoeic themes. Analyzes four drafts of "The Forging of the One Ring." Illustrations.

#### Additional Keywords

Creative process; Creativity and creation; Wynne, Patrick—Sources; Wynne, Patrick—Technique

# Sauron Gets Drafted

## (and Other Thoughts on the Battle of Creativity)

### 21st Mythopoeic Conference Guest of Honor Address

Patrick Wynne

There's probably nothing more difficult for an artist to put into words than how his creativity works. Trying to pin down creativity is like trying to catch a soap bubble — just when you think you've got it in your grasp, it disappears. But I've always had a knack for making life difficult for myself, so of course I'm going to attempt to describe the indescribable and give you some idea of how my creative process works — and in some cases, how it *doesn't* work.

I wish I could tell you that I find drawing to be a lyrical and transcendent experience in which I lovingly caress an image into existence. It is for some people. But for me, more often than not, sitting down at the drawing board feels like marching into battle. Sometimes Art, like War, is Hell. I'll have an idea in my mind, but it's not about to surrender and come out peaceably with its hands up. I've got to go in there and drag the idea out by force, kicking and screaming, and by the time I've worked it over mercilessly with a pencil and persuaded it to lie on the paper and do as it's told, I'm exhausted and no fun at all to be around.

You can count yourself lucky then that you've never had to watch me actually do a drawing before your very eyes. It's not a pretty sight. But all the same, I do want to give you some idea of how a drawing takes shape. Fortunately, I'm a hopeless draftoholic, and most of my finished pieces are preceded by at least one, and sometimes as many as three or four, preliminary drafts. So I'm going to present a series of drawings, consisting of a finished illustration and the three preliminary drafts that led up to it. This way you can, in effect, peek over my shoulder while I'm at the drawing board — but still maintain a safe distance.

In 1988 I met the composer Thomas Peterson, and he commissioned me to do a series of six illustrations for the score of his musical saga "The Tale of the Rings of Power" — a cover illustration and five illustrations depicting the five main sections of the work. Gary Hunnewell has described "The Tale" as "Handel's *Messiah* for Tolkien fans," and it features musical settings of poetry from *The Lord of the Rings* performed by an orchestra, a choir, soloists, and a narrator. The first section, entitled "Of the One Ring," is concerned with the creation of the Rings of Power, so to illustrate that section I decided to depict "The Forging of the One Ring." This is the piece we'll be looking at.

The first draft is shown in fig. 1. The first thing you'll

notice, besides the fact that it's very *bad*, is that it focuses almost entirely on a character. I wanted to show Sauron clearly and up close even though I knew this was going to give me problems.

For one thing, Tolkien provided very little text to go on. He often alluded to the forging of the One Ring, but he never narrated it as an actual scene. The interior decor of Mt. Doom is adequately described in *The Return of the King*; but as for Sauron's physical appearance at this period in history — circa the year 1600 of the Second Age — the only information I could find had been cleverly concealed in one of the footnotes to "The History of Celeborn and Galadriel" in *Unfinished Tales*, where it says that "at the beginning of the Second Age ... [Sauron] was still beautiful to look at, or could still assume a beautiful visible shape" (p. 254, note 8). Really makes him spring into focus doesn't it?

This excruciatingly vague character description is typical of Tolkien, and it means that depicting one of Tolkien's characters is always a risky business, since any rendition will be highly subjective and therefore likely to conflict with the far superior mental images of the monsters and the critics. It might be understandable then why some Tolkien artists try to avoid the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism by drawing the characters as if you were looking at them through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, so tiny that no incriminating details can be picked out. Other omit the characters from their illustrations altogether and stick with landscapes. Paula DiSante once referred to this approach as The Neutron-Bombing of Middle-earth: "The people have been eliminated, but the buildings are still standing" (*Mythlore* 49, p. 40). This is a safe approach, but it's also mind-numbingly *boring*. Pure landscapes do have a legitimate place in Tolkien illustration, but it's a rare Tolkien fan who's mainly interested in the scenery. Most of us read and re-read Tolkien because we love the characters, and for an artist to leave their visualization entirely up to the viewer ignores the whole purpose of illustration. For an illustration is a lot more than just a pretty picture — it's an invitation to look into the mind of the artist. When you look at an illustration, you ask the same question C.S. Lewis said lies at the heart of friendship: "Do you see the same truth?" (*The Four Loves*, p. 97). And the Neutron-Bombers come back with the surly response: "None of your damn business."

So chances are, a lot of you are looking at this Sauron and thinking, "That's not how I see him." Still, I think that



Figure 2.

"The Forging of the One Ring" draft 2

sort of comparison and disagreement is much more engaging than staring at some empty volcanic landscape or blurry figure in the distance. And actually, this isn't how I see Sauron either — not yet. Despite the fact that the only textual detail I had to go on was that Sauron was beautiful, in this draft he's not particularly good-looking. Tolkien wrote in his essay "On Fairy-stories" that modern people "find it difficult to conceive of evil and beauty together. The fear of the beautiful fay that ran through the elder ages almost eludes our grasp" (p. 65). I seem to have been suffering from this modern deficiency of the imagination while drawing the first draft, and the result is a perfect example of the Frederick's of Mordor school of costume design. This is a fairly common flaw in Tolkien illustrations. I realize *now* that no self-respecting Dark Lord would be caught *dead* in a get-up like this; but in attempting to telegraph the message "This Is An Evil Character" it's all too easy to fall into a stereotypical visual shorthand involving ugly people wearing outrageous costumes with spikes, spines, scales, claws, horns, you-name-it. Sauron here doesn't much look the part of the majestic fallen angel. He just looks slightly ridiculous.

Another problem with this draft is Sauron's pose — it was supposed to be dramatic, but unfortunately the result was more like John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever." I keep a file of reference photographs, called a "photo morgue," and I try to work from photos when possible; but there was

nothing in my morgue even remotely approximating what I needed for Sauron. So I had to work straight from my imagination, and my imagination wasn't quite up to the job all on its own.

On to draft 2 — Sauron goes Art Deco! (fig. 2). You'll notice that this draft is inked. I like to ink in my preliminary drafts for several reasons: it makes the mistakes in a design a lot easier to spot; it gives me a chance to experiment with new pen techniques; and the bottom line is, I think inking is a lot of fun. If drafting a drawing in pencil is a battle, then inking it is like the victory celebration.

By this time I'd decided to unify all the "Tale of the Rings of Power" illustrations with circular borders, and while I had my rapidograph-pen compass handy I experimented with shading the background in concentric circles. I also used it to do the curve of Sauron's cloak, which resembles stylized batwings — a learned and completely pointless reference to Sauron's days as a vampire in the First Age. His taste in clothes has improved considerably, and we can kiss those scales and spines good-bye. But that pose is still Saturday-Night-Feverish.

As for the flat, Art-Deco geometry of this piece, several of the early drafts of illustrations for "The Tale" were highly stylized. Fig. 3 shows another early illustration for "The Tale," a portrait of Galadriel in an Art Nouveau style. Later this transmogrified into "The Last Riding of the Keepers of the Rings" (fig. 4) with the addition



Figure 3.

"A Elbereth Gilthoniel"



of Elrond and Bilbo and a healthy dollop of realism. My reasoning behind the stylization was that the artwork should reflect Tom Peterson's music as much as Tolkien's texts, and since music is a highly abstract artform I thought a highly graphic approach would be appropriate. I was showing these preliminary versions to Tom to get his input, and while some people have told me they like the second draft of "The Forging" a lot, maybe even more than the final version, Tom's reaction was a bit more subdued. He said, "Well, it's better than the first one."

Despite my obviously brilliant theories about the abstract nature of music, Tom Peterson wanted realistic illustrations. So I produced draft 3 (fig. 5). I still hadn't turned up any good photo references, but a couple hours spent rummaging through a book of Gustave Doré's Bible engravings helped me design some plausible folds for the robe. And I'll have to confess to spending some time posing in front of a full-length mirror in my bathrobe. The spirit of John Travolta has been exorcized from the pose at last by raising the left arm rather than the right, which also gives a nice visual flow to the figure — the eye is drawn up the body from the left foot to the left hand, focussing your attention on the Ring.

Tom liked this version and gave me the go-ahead to turn it into a finished piece, but I still thought there were some problems. For one thing, the right arm bothered me.



Figure 5.

"The Forging of the One Ring" draft 3

I knew from my modeling sessions in the bathrobe that this was, if you'll pardon the term, anatomically correct. All the same, that arm seems to be sprouting from Sauron's navel, or popping out of his left sleeve, and besides that it's a horizontal element that spoils the vertical flow of the figure. A more subtle problem is one of viewpoint: the lower half of the Sauron's body is drawn as though viewed from slightly above; but the upper half, and the head in particular, seem to be viewed from slightly below. The two halves don't quite fit.

Fig. 6, at long last, shows the final version. I raised Sauron's right arm, and that solved the navel problem. Now the arm adds to the vertical flow, and the pose looks more natural. Unfortunately, the old saying "Leave well enough alone" probably proved true in the case of Sauron's face. I corrected the angle of his head, but in the process I lost something in the face — a nice feral quality it had in draft 3. Still another draft might have improved this, but frankly by this time I was sick and tired of looking at Sauron's face, and I was staring a deadline in the face as well. So this would have to do.

You can see how I ultimately avoided the Frederick's of Mordor school. Sauron is physically beautiful at last, and his spiritual nastiness is more subtly suggested instead of being tossed in your face like a cream pie. His robes and cloak are fairly ordinary, or at least not garish, and their black color only *hints* at evil, since even in Middle-earth



Figure 4.

"The Last Riding of the Keepers of the Rings"



Figure 6.

black was a morally ambiguous color and some of the Good Guys were known to wear black, such as the Númenóreans and Túrin Turambar. It's the setting moreso than Sauron's physical appearance that tells you something about his moral fiber — obviously, someone whose idea of a good time was hanging around inside an active volcano couldn't possibly be up to any good. The dramatic lighting from below also adds a lot to the general feel of creepiness. Mickey Mouse would probably look like Evil Incarnate in this setting.

"The Forging of the One Ring" was a more difficult drawing to complete than most — having to produce four drafts isn't meticulous so much as it's embarrassing. But it's not always this difficult, thank God. My main problem in drawing "The Forging" was a lack of good photo references, and if it hadn't been for Gustave Doré, and my bathrobe, I might still be producing drafts of this piece. But that's the way my creative process usually works — I'll

"The Forging of the One Ring" final version

conceive the mental image first, then I'll have to ransack my photo morgue for material to help bring that image into focus. But once in a while the exact opposite process occurs — I'll run across a wonderfully evocative photo, and then I'll have to ransack my books to find a story that fits it.

For example, fig. 7 is a photo I clipped from *Smithsonian* magazine of Professor Frederic Cassidy, compiler of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. The moment I saw this photo, I knew it would make a great illustration — that steely-eyed gaze, that huge book, and that wonderfully dramatic foreshortening of the arm and hand — but I had absolutely no idea how I'd be able to use it. So Professor Cassidy cooled his heels in my photo morgue for quite a few months, until one day Carl Hostetter called me up and asked me if I would draw the cover illustration for the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship's *Reference Library*. The words were hardly out of Carl's mouth when it hit me: Professor Cassidy would make a great Gandalf. The drawing that





Figure 7. Professor Frederic Cassidy  
(photo reprinted, courtesy of Robert Frerck)

resulted was "Gandalf in the Library of Minas Tirith" (fig. 8), which also served as the cover of *Mythlore* 62. With "Gandalf" the first draft was the *final* draft — no preliminaries, no fuss, no bathrobe — a *lot* easier than forging "The Forging of the One Ring," and it just goes to show that sometimes happiness is a well-stocked morgue.

As much as I've gone on here about "The Forging of the One Ring," there's still one thing I can't tell you about it. If you take a quick look at the different drafts, you'll see that as much as the styles and details changed, the basic image always stayed the same: Sauron standing, with his arms raised, on a triangular wedge of stone thrust over an abyss, his hair and cloak billowing in the updraft as the flames of Mt. Doom spiral in towards the One Ring. And where that basic image came from, I don't know. I have no conscious memory of inventing it; I sat down at the drawing board, and it was there.

Tolkien would have said that my Sauron came, not from the Muse, but from the compost heap. That was his metaphor for the creative process of the unconscious mind. He once wrote that an idea "grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind; out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps. No doubt there is much selection, as with a gardener: what one throws on one's personal compost-heap ..." (*Tolkien: A Biography*, pp. 140-41)

Of course Tolkien threw a higher quality of mulch on his personal compost heap than I've thrown on mine, and sometimes I think I grow more weeds than flowers. And every once in a while something truly weird and totally unexpected springs up. Take cartoons, for example. "The Joy of Spawning," (fig. 9) served as the cover illustration of the third issue of *Vinyar Tengwar*, which will give you some idea of the sort of quality scholarship you're privy to

as a member of the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship. Cartoons invent themselves — they just spring up out of nowhere like mushrooms on a lawn after a rain (which is probably not the first time my sense of humor has been compared to a fungus). In November of 1989 I sat down at the drawing board intending to begin work on a cover illustration for *Mythlore* of Ransom meeting Augray the sorn from C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*. Half an hour later I looked down and discovered that I'd produced something completely different (fig. 10). Evidently my unconscious mind was more interested in hrossa than it was in sorns, and it ran roughshod over my conscious intentions. I never did finish the drawing of Ransom and Augray, which is why you saw Gandalf glaring at you from the cover of *Mythlore* 62.

For another example of compost at play we can turn to a set of designs you'll all be familiar with, my so-called "Celtic Circles," one for Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien (fig. 11). They were first published in 1983 in *Mythlore* 35; and in the next issue there appeared a letter from Jeanne Wardwell, who analyzed the symbolism of the designs. She wrote:

Tolkien acknowledges his debt to "things Celtic" in his literary endeavors, as does Williams; and it is here that Wynne's method becomes clear. The designs for Tolkien and Williams include some of the central figures of the imagination in Celtic shape, but stated much more simply ... Lewis, however, a Celt himself, is given unabashedly Celtic design, glorious in its profusion. The center symbol of each design is particularly apt; each may be considered a gateway to the numinous: the hobbit-hole door, out of which one goes to find it; the



Figure 8. Gandalf in the Library of Minas Tirith

wardrobe into which one goes to find it. (Mythlore 36, p. 22)

Well, this is wonderful stuff, but no one was more amazed than Wynne to find out what "Wynne's method" had been. On a conscious level, when I chose the center symbols I was not concerned with "gateways to the numinous," I was concerned with nothing more deep than what would fit in those tiny circular spaces. As for Lewis' design being more Celtic than the others, that's because it was the first design to be drawn. I decided it looked too busy, especially with all that interlace, and so I made the other designs much simpler. I only wish Jeanne Wardwell had explained why I got the three inner circles off-center in the Lewis design.

Kathryn Lindskoog had her own two bits to add to the discussion. She wrote to me in October of 1983: "I noticed someone's analysis of your center symbols in the latest *Mythlore*. I assumed that the writer was stretching your intellectual subtlety a little." Not that Kay herself hasn't stretched my intellectual subtlety once or twice. There's the cover I did for *Mythlore* 56, for example, a portrait of Galadriel in a sort of bargain-basement Albrecht Dürer style (fig. 12). About a month after the issue came out, Kay wrote me a letter relating the following discovery:

I never even looked at the Winter *Mythlore* cover until today, since [I'm not well acquainted with Tolkien's books.] I saw it was yours and beautiful and never unearthed it again until tonight. Then I saw the *Trees* in her skirt. I handed it to John, saying *look*, and he saw it for himself soon also. Just beautiful.



Figure 9. The Joy of Spawning



The subtleties of Malacandrian humor often eluded Ransom.

Figure 10. The Subtleties of Malacandrian Humor

My reaction to this was, "Trees in her skirt? What trees in her skirt?" But when I got out my copy of *Mythlore*, sure enough, there they were — the folds of Galadriel's gown look like the trunks and branches of trees. This was entirely unintentional, but at the same time it's incredibly appropriate — for Galadriel was the queen of the woodland realm of Lórien, famous for its mallorn trees; she lived in a tree in Caras Galadhon, "The City of the Trees"; and the first element in her name, the Sindarin word *galad*, meaning "radiance," was often reinterpreted as *galadh*, meaning "tree," and her name altered to *Galadhriel*.

Now I might be shooting myself in the foot by acknowledging the importance of an unconscious element in my art, and I hope that from now on every time you see something subtle or clever in my work you won't say, "Yeah well, it's not like he actually *knew* what he was doing." My creative process doesn't consist *entirely* of putting my conscious mind on cruise control. But we're still left with a question: do connotations like those discovered by Jeanne Wardwell and Kay Lindskoog have any real value? Do those gateways to the numinous and the trees in Galadriel's skirt really *matter*, since the artist himself did *not* intend for them to be there? A gentleman whose intellectual subtlety is far less stretched than my own has answered this question with a resounding "Si," namely Umberto Eco. In 1983 Eco published a little book called *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, in which he described the processes involved in writing that wonderful historical novel.





Figure 11. Tolkien, Lewis and Williams Celtic Circles

Eco observed that a written text often produces effects and meanings for the reader which were not consciously intended by the author. In fact, he says that "... the large majority of readings reveal effects of sense that one had not thought of" (*Postscript*, p. 3). Not only does Eco consider these unintended meanings to be valid, he believes that they are more important than what the author consciously intended the text to mean, so much so that he comes to the following conclusion: "The author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text." (*Ibid.*, p. 7).

I think that Eco's remarks are as valid for art as they are for literature, though I will draw the line at his final conclusion — I'd hate to think that now that I've completed a substantial body of work, I ought to go out and jump off a bridge, as much as that might please those who own my originals, the value of which would instantly quadruple. I have every intention of troubling the path of my visual texts for a long time to come.

But I have spent more than enough time troubling the pages of *Mythlore* with this guided tour of the Artistic Mind (such as it is). If nothing else, I hope I've managed to convey that there is usually more involved in the process of creating a drawing than one might expect. The next time you find yourself admiring a particularly fine drawing by Paula DiSante or Sarah Beach or any of the other artists with whom I've had the privilege of sharing the pages of this journal, remember that the illustration before you is the result of many hours of hard work, careful research, and thought. And when we artists invite you to look into our minds through the windows formed by our intricate choreography of lines and dots, while you might not see the same truths there that you call your own, you'll always see the love we have for our craft. It's that love that keeps us coming back to the drawing board, however difficult and unpredictable the experience may occasionally be. Yes, sometimes Art is Hell — but it can be a bit of Heaven on Earth as well.

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Figure 12. Galadriel cover from *Mythlore* 56